



# Language Use and Sustainable Development: Opportunities and Challenges for Policy-Makers and Educators in North-east Vietnamese Areas

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## Abstract

Vietnam represents a country with 54 ethnic groups; however, the majority (88%) of the population are of Vietnamese heritage. Some of the other ethnic groups such as Tay, Thai, Muong, Hoa, Khmer, and Nung have a population of around 1 million each, while the Brau, Roman, and Odu consist only of a hundred people each. Living in northern Vietnam, close to the Chinese border (see Figure 1), the Tay people speak a language of the Central Tai language group called Though, T'o, Tai Tho, Ngan, Phen, Thu Lao, or Pa Di. Tay remains one of 10 ethnic languages used by 1 million speakers (Buoi, 2003). The Tày ethnic group has a rich culture of wedding songs, poems, dance, and music and celebrate various festivals. Wet rice cultivation, canal digging and grain threshing on wooden racks are part of the Tày traditions. Their villages situated near the foothills often bear the names of nearby mountains, rivers, or fields. This study discusses the status and role of the Tày language in Northeast Vietnam. It discusses factors, which have affected the habitual use of the Tay language, the connection between language shift and development and provides a model for the sustainability and promotion of minority languages. It remains fundamentally imperative to strengthen and to foster positive attitudes of the community towards the Tày language. Tày's young people must be enlightened to the reality their Tày non-usage could render their mother tongue defunct, which means their history stands to be lost.

## Subject Areas

Educational Leadership / Language Education

## Keywords

Tay language, Vietnam minority languages, Northeast Vietnam, Language education.

## 1. Introduction

The Vietnam represents a country with 54 ethnic groups; however, the majority (88%) of the population are of Vietnamese heritage. Some of the other ethnic groups such as Tày,

Thai, Muong, Hoa, Khmer, and Nung have a population of around 1 million each, while the Brau, Roman, and Odu consist only of a hundred people each. Living in northern Vietnam, close to the Chinese border (see Figure 1), the Tay people speak a language of the Central Tai language group called *Thô*, *T'o*, *Tai Tho*, *Ngan*, *Phen*, *Thu Lao*, or *Pa Di*. Tay remains one of 10 ethnic languages used by 1 million speakers (Buoi, 2003). The Tay ethnic group has a rich culture of wedding songs, poems, dance, and music and celebrate various festivals. Wet rice cultivation, canal digging and grain threshing on wooden racks are part of the *Tày* traditions.

Their villages situated near the foothills often bear the names of nearby mountains, rivers, or fields.

This study discusses the status and role of the *Tày* language in Northeast Vietnam. It discusses factors, which have affected the habitual use of the *Tày* language, the connection between language shift and development and provides a model for the sustainability and promotion of minority languages.



### 1.1. Earlier Studies of language shift

Although *Tày* children speak their first words in their mother tongue, their vernacular gradually expands beyond *Tày* as they communicate with family members or villagers. Particularly, as they grow up, the children's exposure to the Kinh language results in a high juvenile bilingual rate in Northeastern Vietnam areas (Le Ha, P., Ha, V. H., & Dat, 2014). However, according to the open door (*Doi Moi*) policy accelerated the decline in the use of the *Tày* language. Due to globalization, *Tày*-Vietnamese bilingualism shifted to Vietnamese-English bilingualism. Following Vietnam's independence from the French in

1945, Vietnamese became the national language.

Since Vietnamese reflects the national language, its dominance contributed to its use by the Tay community (Nguyen, 2012). Furthermore, with internationalization English gained prominence. Increased external relations posed a critical threat to the Tày language (Nguyen, 2012) to the point, there has been a change in language use in Tày families. Moreover, as Northeastern Vietnam borders five countries where Chinese proves the dominant language of trade and commerce and due to greater trade contact with the Chinese on the northern border areas, the use of the Tày language continues to diminish. According to Kosonen (2004), the younger generation prefers to speak Vietnamese, English and Chinese rather than their mother tongue.

## **1.2. Language policy**

The government has prioritized education as the key factor towards the long-term development of the Tày language, and minority languages in general. Several governmental acts prioritize Tay language maintenance. The government also maintained ethnic languages in the national curriculum as compulsory components at primary educational levels in bilingual and multilingual areas of the country. The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam states: "At local elementary schools, people of ethnic minorities have the right to learn in their own language" (Dorian, 1981, p. XXX) and the Primary Education Law issued on 10/12/1988 explains: "The State creates favorable conditions for people of ethnic minorities to learn their ethnic voice and writings. The Vietnamese Constitution of 1946 and 1992 states that all minority groups have the right to maintain their Mother tongue in their schooling as well as to use their languages to preserve their culture, Le Ha, P., Ha, V. H., & Dat, B. (2014). The teaching and learning of ethnic languages shall comply with the regulations of the Government". It is clear then that ethnic languages receive the special support of the State of Vietnam, which could facilitate Tày language preservation.

Several schools and colleges in the mountainous areas cater to students from ethnic minorities and students from the Tày minority and other minority dialects can enter universities with lower scores. Thai Nguyen University, Tay Bac University (located in Son La), and recently the University of Tan Trao (located in Tuyen Quang) accept students from the mountainous areas in North Vietnam. However, despite the fact, the government awards privileges to citizens who retain their mother tongue, the Tay language is used only in a few domains.

## 1. Method

This study administered a written questionnaire to survey the language used by people in three northeastern provinces of Vietnam, Cao Bang, Bac Kan and Lang Son. The survey sample included people cross three generations– grandparents (over 50 years old), parents (20-50 years), and children (01-20 years old) (refer Table 1) who live in urban areas, in the suburbs, and in remotes areas. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. Inherent in its design, the survey elicited participants' opinions, attitude, and language about heritage language maintenance in Northeastern Vietnam. To ensure clarity and comprehension, the survey comprised simply worded questions in Vietnamese. The questionnaire addresses major issues relating to the status and role of the Tày language in Northeastern Vietnam, including intergenerational language transmission as well as attitude towards the Tày language and language maintenance the analysis employed descriptive statistical output on the data obtained. Refer to Table 1 to review the survey sample demographics:

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics for the Tày language survey in northeastern Vietnam

Generation	Cao Bang province	Bac Kan province	Lang Son province
1. G1- Grandparents (over 50 years old)	148	148	84
2. G2-Parents (20-50 years old)	148	149	84
3. G3-Children (01-20 years old)	148	149	84
Total	444	446	252

## 3. Findings and Discussions

### 3.1. Finding

#### Tày Language Usage/non-usage

The study reveals the following details:

#### Intergenerational language transmission

In the home, the elderly and middle-aged communicate in their mother tongue frequently, but the younger generation often speaks Vietnamese. Specifically, the latter use approximately 40% Tày and approximately 62% Vietnamese. In 18.7% of multigenerational families, the initial language of the children is Vietnamese, not Tày. The children only wanted

to know Vietnamese and English. Thus, the emerging reality is that small families consisting of two generations—young parents and young children; or families consisting of only young spouses habitually use Vietnamese and the Tày language is not heard by the children. It is clear then that the language's very existence stands at risk if it is not being transmitted to the younger members of the community.

### **The Tày language usage in specific domains**

#### ***Educational domain***

From the survey results in Pac Nam, Bac Kan, and Cao Bang, 87% of the respondents expressed a lack of desire to teach or to learn the Tày language.

#### ***Social and political domain***

When celebrating cultural activities, people speak Vietnamese. Furthermore, in political life in the village, like public meetings Vietnamese remains the prominent language. While village meetings use both Vietnamese and Tày, 68% of the respondents stated they speak Tày and 59% said they used Vietnamese. As for communication in the marketplace, 64.39% of the respondents reported, they used Tày and 49.24% of the respondents said they used Vietnamese. Although Tày is not being used for intergenerational transmission it is still being used by some of the respondents in these domains.

#### ***Religious domain***

The Tày language is used to express spiritual and material values through the generations. Only the native tongue can convey the inherent cultural essence encapsulated in such beliefs and values. All the respondents said they used Tày for worship. However, they used Vietnamese for writing and storytelling. Survey of language transmission across generations in the three provinces of Cao Bang clearly reflected the relegation of Tày to the cultural and religious realms.

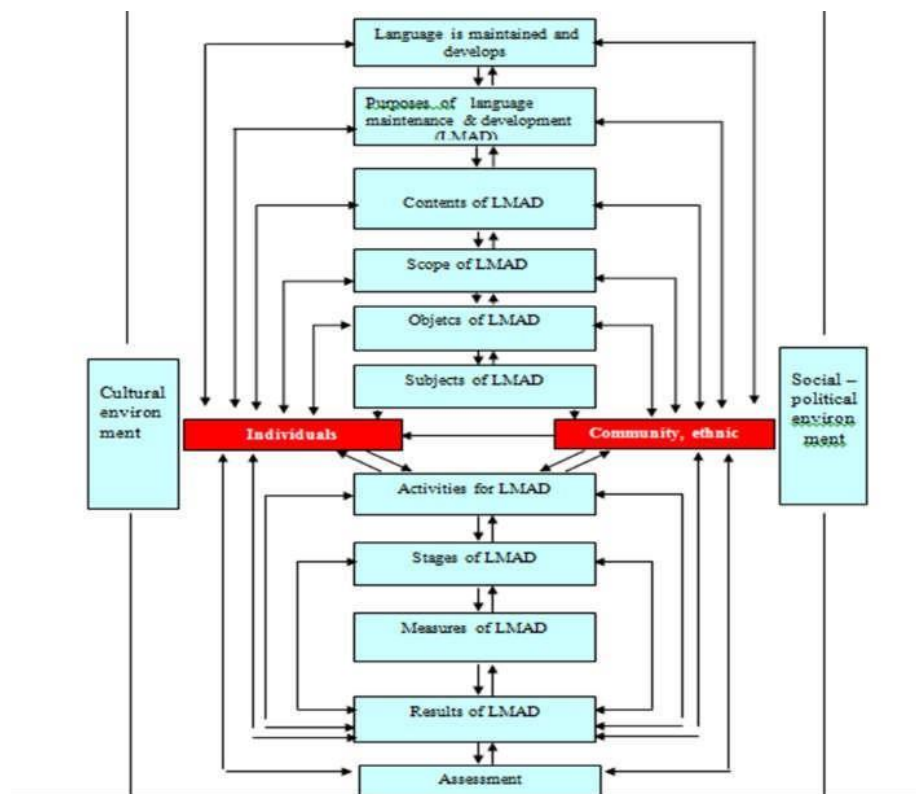
#### ***Language shift and globalization***

Globalization has diminished Tày language salience. As Vietnam internationalizes, global languages, like English, continue to gain a prominence. This is due to the widespread use of English since the Open-Door Policy (Doi Moi) as well as the dominating use of Chinese in the borders of neighboring areas in the Northeastern region. Learning languages, like English and Chinese, also hold the promise of a more prosperous life for such language skills prove marketable. With globalization and the increased functionality of Vietnamese, Tày's practicality in the Vietnamese delta wanes.

The affluence of some members of this speech community continues to lead to a language shift. Due to urbanization, some Tày people have achieved unprecedented prosperity; thus, their demand for consumer goods like modern vehicles has increased. To negotiate the purchase of these luxury items, the transaction requires the ability to verbalize in

Vietnamese, not in Tày. In fact, communication media, like advertising programs, telephone conversations, and television shows use Vietnamese. In fact, the Vietnamese language dominates the economy, diplomacy, defense, science, education, transportation, etc. Meanwhile, the Tày language is limited to the cultural and spiritual domains

The picture of the potential Tày language extinction in Northeast and the way it makes for SD (Spell out) provides a warning for many other minority languages. In the next section a model for language revitalization is provided.



**Figure 2.** General model for Tày language maintenance and development

The schools compile curriculum, organize ethnic language teaching, training teachers, educate on ethnic awareness and traditions. Local authorities manage programs and projects, connect language communities, and search for external support. Non-government organizations provide financial and technical support as well as seek external aid.

Members of the Tày community represent the most important element in the language programs success. Therefore, community members must be enlightened as to their responsibilities and cultural pride in the acquirement, use, and preservation of their ethnic language. They must protect and develop the language's voice through generations, dis-

seminate Tày to the community, and foster other ethnic group's acceptance of the Tày language.

### **Tày Language Revitalization**

Use of a minority and dying language in more domains and across generations is crucial for the survival of any language. Most of the children (90%) and mothers (75%) do not want to learn or teach the Tày language. Such a negative attitude proves detrimental to Tày language revitalization and survival. Vietnam must implement language programs to arrest the Tày language decline. Assistance from researchers, including local and central authorities, plus education agencies in which schools play a key role is urgent. Furthermore, non-government organizations and prominent members of the Tày

### **3.2. Discussions**

Use Most of the Tày people do not display much enthusiasm for their mother tongue, and the younger generation continues to abandon their ethnic language and replace Tày with Vietnamese and other languages. One of the main reasons for such negative sentiments remains the school curriculum where the medium of instruction is generally Vietnamese. Tày only exists in select places, such as the training centers, ethnic boarding schools, etc. To encourage the use of the Tày language it is important to improve the attitude of the speech community towards its own ethnic language. This survey illuminates where and why people speak or fail to speak Tày. Once experts understand the underlying reasons for lack of use of the heritage language, then communities can design effective solutions to encourage use of the heritage language. Fostering a positive attitude toward Tày beyond cultural and religious domains opens the door for operationalizing other programs. These include instituting a character system, standardizing and developing Tày literature tradition, developing the curriculum, teaching the Tày language in schools and in public learning centers. Such programs could foster a positive attitude and perception of the heritage language. Community members must view their ethnic language as both an integrative (social cohesion within speech community) and instrumental (ability to achieve specific utility-based objectives) tool for a heritage language to gain stature in the eyes of the members of the community.

Based on the survey results of Tày language in Cao Bang, Bac Kan, and Lang Son, the process of promoting the status and role of the Tày language should be integrated with the process of maintaining social sustainability within the Northeast region of Vietnam. This process comprises four main factors:

1. Economics: The Tày language must be a regional language, which plays a significant role in communication and commercial exchange in the border areas.
2. Culture: The Tày community possesses an enormously invaluable collection of ancient literature and poems as well as folk songs. Hence, use of the Tày language

helps in the maintaining of Tày culture.

3. Education: Failing to teach the Tày language in schools poses an obstacle to the preservation of traditional educational values and adversely affects academic results.
4. Demography: The number of members of the Tày community continues to increase but the number of its native language users has been falling and Vietnamese and Chinese continue to replace the Tày language.

It remains fundamentally imperative to strengthen and to foster positive attitudes of the community towards the Tày language. Tày's young people must be enlightened to the reality their Tày nonusage could render their mother tongue defunct, which means their history stands to be lost.

## 5. Conclusions

This study proposes a model for language maintenance and development to expand the use of a heritage language, in this case the Tay language. Proficiency in the Tày language and speakers conversing in Tày across generations and domains must be encouraged. Raising active awareness and positive attitudes toward acquiring and using their heritage language will facilitate the preservation of the Tày language. Indeed, the constant use of other ethnic minority languages must be considered crucial elements for sustainable development within the region.

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